

****Misunderstanding in Sodom? Did Lot Wrong the Men of Sodom?****

****Evaluation of Queergedacht – Chapter 10****

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Was the issue in Sodom really about sex? Was Lot ultimately to blame for the uproar in Sodom, not the Sodomites? Should this story even be used to discuss the topic of homosexuality?

Chapter 10 of *Queergedacht* addresses the story of the destruction of Sodom. This is the most well-known biblical story in which same-sex acts play a role. Nevertheless, it is hardly used in today's Christian debate about homosexuality.

The author of the article considers it irrelevant to the question of same-sex partnerships. One can agree with his conclusion that this story "should not be interpreted as a condemnation of consensual same-sex sexual relationships among men" (p. 166).² What happened in Sodom or what could have happened—however one understands it—cannot be compared with a loving same-sex partnership.

However, this is not the main thesis of the article. Rather, the author wants to propose an interpretation of the Sodom story in which sex plays no role at all. He draws on a thesis by Derrick Bailey from 1955.³ John Boswell, a well-known historian from Yale who lived with a homosexual partner for 20 years, revived this in his book *Homosexuality and the Western Christian Tradition* from 1980.⁴

According to this thesis, the issue is not initially about sex. For the author, Lot made two serious mistakes. First, Lot violated the honor of the Sodomites by "inviting the strangers at the gate to himself first" (p. 156). This was a breach of hospitality. Lot himself was a ger, a "foreigner."

As a newcomer, he should have allowed the citizens of Sodom to take the lead in welcoming the two strangers as guests.

The second and even worse mistake: The people of Sodom only wanted to "know the strangers" (*jada'*) to find out what kind of strangers they were (p. 158). Were they spies? Did they come from far away or from the neighboring province? Were they just passing through or looking for land? They merely wanted to chat peacefully with the strangers. And if it turned out that something was wrong with them, they could always take measures.

However, Lot completely misunderstood the word "know" and misinterpreted it as sexual desire. In an outrageous manner, he offered the men his daughters. This deeply offended the city dwellers. They rightfully became angry. Only now did sex come into play. They wanted to teach the guests a sexual lesson. In other words, Lot was the provocateur who brought about the terrible situation.

This thesis critically depends on how one interprets the Hebrew word **jada** in Genesis 19:5. The men of Sodom surrounded Lot's house and called out to him: “Where are the men who came to you tonight? Bring them out to us that we may know (*jada’*) them.”

Does **jada** mean to gain knowledge about a person? Or does it mean to be intimate with someone, that is, to have sexual intercourse? Both meanings lie within the semantic range of the Hebrew word. In 16 of its 957 occurrences, **jada** refers to knowledge in a sexual sense: the sexual intercourse of a man with a woman (Gen 4:1, 17, 25; 38:26; Judg 19:25; 1 Sam 1:19; 1 Kings 1:4; cf. 1QSa 110) or of a woman with a man (Gen 19:8; Judg 11:39; cf. “to know sexual intercourse with males” in Num 31:17, 18; Judg 21:11, 12) or same-sex intercourse (Gen 19:5; Judg 19:22).^{^5} While these may be relatively few instances, the context is unmistakable in each case. The root **jd** in the sense of sexual recognition also appears in other ancient Near Eastern languages, such as Akkadian, Ugaritic, and Egyptian.^{^6}

The author of the chapter in **Queergedacht** opts for the meaning of **jada** in Genesis 19:5 as ordinary acquaintance and that Lot misinterpreted the original intention of the men as sexual. But could that really be true?

The word **jada** appears again in close connection in Genesis 19:8. There, Lot makes an immoral offer to the men. He says: “Behold, I have two daughters who have never known (*jada’*) a man.” Here, **jada** clearly has a sexual meaning. If it is meant that way in verse 8, it is likely that it was also meant that way in verse 5.^{^7}

In **Queergedacht**, however, it is suggested that Lot misunderstood what the people at his door meant by **jada**. However, this is not convincing. It is reasonable to assume that Lot knew exactly what the men of Sodom wanted. He saw and heard them. Lot spoke to them outside his door. He had eye contact. He observed their body language, their emotions. For him, there was no doubt that the Sodomites wanted to sexually demean the guests. When one asks for information, it is presented differently than when one intends a sexual assault.

They “surrounded” Lot's house before turning to its inhabitants. This indicated their hostile intent from the beginning. Lot went out and immediately closed the door behind him, apparently to protect those inside.

Lot began his attempt to dissuade the men from their intentions with an appeal to reason: “Do not do anything wicked” (Gen 19:7). The verb “to do wickedness” denotes a serious disapproval (cf. Gen 21:11, 12; 43:6; 44:5; 48:17), often a grave moral failing (cf. Gen 31:7; 38:10; 1 Sam 2:25). In Lot's eyes, the men had something wicked in mind.

In a second step, Lot tries to satisfy their sexual desire with a corresponding “offer.” Lot offers his two virgin daughters instead of the two strangers (Gen 19:8, first part). He clearly emphasizes the sexual innocence of the women, likely in the hope that this would make them appear more valuable in the eyes of the men. In doing so, Lot risked the lives of his daughters, even their hope for an inheritance—all for the sake of the strangers. Whether this is the act of a righteous host or the offer of a morally depraved outsider is debatable. It is clear that Lot was trying to buy time, hoping that the mob would calm down.^{^8}

Thirdly, Lot claimed that it would be a terrible violation of hospitality if they behaved so contemptibly (Gen 19:8, second part). At Lot's invitation, the strangers had found "shade" under his roof, meaning protection and refuge. It would be a breach of hospitality to lay hands on the men.⁹

Lot's reaction clearly shows that he understood that the men wished to give his guests a sexual lesson. Lot himself must have been blind if he had so grossly misunderstood the request or demand for a conversation.

Moreover, even if Lot had misunderstood it, this would only be possible if he believed that the people of Sodom were capable of such a terrible act and wanted to sexually demean the guests. Why did he think that? There must have been similar incidents before.

This may also be the reason why Lot insisted so strongly on bringing the two strangers to his house (see verse 3). He wanted to ensure that they did not stay overnight in the open square. But what did Lot believe would happen if they stayed outside? It seems he anticipated that something bad might happen to them if they spent the night in Sodom without the protection of hospitality. Why did the angels initially refuse Lot's offer? A house was always better than the open square. Perhaps they feared the consequences for Lot if they stayed with him.

And why would all the Sodomites come—from the boy to the old man—to participate in an inquiry? It makes less sense than the biblical text wanting to show that the sexual perversions of the Sodomites were a problem for all generations.

All of this suggests that the Sodomites had sexual intentions.¹⁰ After all, God also speaks in Genesis 18:20 of a great outcry against Sodom and of very grave sin, which necessitated a divine visit: "The outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah is indeed great, and their sin is very grave. I will go down to see if they have done entirely according to the outcry that has come to me; and if not, I will know" (Gen 18:20-21).

Such godless behavior of the inhabitants, especially in the sexual realm, fits well into the picture and confirms God's assessment of the city. Also, in the neighboring stories in the second part of Genesis 19 and in Genesis 20, each is about sexual sin and its punishment.

Finally, there is the story in Judges 19:22-30, which consciously picks up the vocabulary of Genesis 19. The parallels are numerous:

Genesis 19:4-10	**Judges 19:22-25**
4 Yet they had not laid down before the men of the city, the men of Sodom, surrounded the house, both young and old, all the people from every quarter of the city.	22 When they had their hearts lightened, behold, the men of the city, wicked men, surrounded the house,
5 And they called to Lot and said to him: "Where are the men who came to you	and beat on the door and said to the old man, the lord of the house: "Bring out the

<p>tonight? Bring them out to us that we may know (jada') them."</p> <p>6 Lot went out to them at the entrance and shut the door behind him</p> <p>7 and said: "Do not do anything wicked, my brothers!"</p> <p>8 "Look, I have two daughters who have not known (jada') a man; let me bring them out to you. Do to them as you wish, but do nothing to these men, for they have come under the shadow of my roof!"</p> <p>9 But they said: "Get back!" And they said: "There is one man who has come here as a foreigner, and he wants to play the judge! Now we will do worse to you than to them." And they pressed hard against the man, against Lot, and they were about to break down the door.</p> <p>10 But the men reached out their hands and brought Lot into the house with them and shut the door.</p>	<p>man who has come to you that we may know him!"</p> <p>23 The man, the lord of the house, went out to them and said to them: "Do not do anything evil, my brothers! After this man has come into my house, you may not commit such a disgrace!"</p> <p>24 Behold, here is my daughter, a virgin, and his concubine; I will bring them out to you. Do with them what is good in your eyes. But do not commit such a heavy disgrace against this man!</p> <p>25 But the men did not heed him.</p> <p>Then the man took his concubine and brought her out to them on the street.</p>
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The parallels are intentional and shed light on each other's stories. For understanding Genesis 19, it is important to note that in Judges 19, it cannot be assumed that the demand of the wicked men refers to questioning the guest of the old man. The author of chapter 10 in *Queergedacht* sees this as well, but claims that in Judges 19, in contrast to Genesis 19, "the demand to know the foreign visitor immediately was about degrading him through same-sex intercourse" (pp. 162-163). However, there is no reason apparent why Genesis 19 should be interpreted differently than Judges 19.

Moreover, Bailey and Boswell's thesis has not found much support in Old Testament scholarship. Michael Brinkschröder, whom the author cites as a source for Bailey's thesis (p. 159, footnote 7), also rejects it.¹¹

The author also claims that references to the sins of Sodom in the Old and New Testament do not speak of fornication. However, there is a very clear passage, namely Jude 7. There it states that "Sodom and Gomorrah... gave themselves over to fornication and went after strange flesh." The word for "fornication" is the Greek *ekporneuō*, which means "to live very

promiscuously”¹² or “to engage in lewd fornication.”¹³ It is used in the Old Testament for sexual sins (Gen 38:24; Lev 19:29; Num 25:1; Ezek 16:17, 26; in a figurative sense: Ex 34:15, 16; Lev 17:7; 2 Chr 21:11; Ezek 20:30). However, the author dismisses Jude 7 as merely a Jewish view of the time, suggesting we could ignore it. It should not be considered an explanation for the Sodom episode (p. 165).

It is true that in the Bible, apart from Genesis 19 and Jude 7, Sodom is mostly used as a synonym for pride and shameless sinfulness or as an image of God’s judgment.¹⁴ It is also true that Jewish interpreters in the 1st century associated the destruction of Sodom with sexual sins.¹⁵ However, they did not invent this. The Letter of Jude does not merely uncritically adopt the opinion of its time; it is also inspired by the word of God. Jude also agrees with other biblical statements:

In Ezekiel 16:43-58, Sodom is mentioned in connection with “abominations”¹⁶ and “shameful acts.”¹⁷ These two terms are used in Leviticus 18 and 20 for sexual sins. Together with Jude 7, there is indeed a biblical tradition that attributes sexual sin to Sodom.

Incidentally, 2 Peter 2:7 also resonates with this when it speaks of Lot and Sodom: God rescued righteous Lot¹⁸, “who was tormented by the lawless behavior of the wicked.” This wording implies sexual immorality. In contrast to the image the author of **Queergedacht** paints of Lot, he is described here as “righteous.”

My conclusion: I envision something different under solid exegesis. The desire to exclude a sexual component as a reason here leads to very selective and, in my opinion, false observations.

What is morally questionable about Sodom consists of three components: xenophobia (lack of hospitality), the exercise of violence, and same-sex practices. The lack of hospitality is dramatically evident in the intended group rape of Lot’s guests.

This has nothing to do with homosexual orientation. Sodom was not a city full of gay men. It was about the ruthless law of the stronger. And they wanted to make the strangers feel that brutally. It is not possible to separate the sexual aspect from the story.

Loving same-sex relationships have nothing to do with this. For that, we must examine other texts of the Bible, such as Leviticus 18 and 20.

1. *Udo Worschech*, “Sodom, whose sins and Lot’s behavior,” in **Queergedacht: Contributions to an Open Discussion about Same-sex Monogamous Relationships**, ed. Werner E. Lange, Dennis Meier, and Reinder Bruinsma (Adendorf: STAB, 2023), pp. 153–169.

2. *Worschech*, p. 166.

3. *Derrick Sherwin Bailey*, **Homosexuality and the Western Christian Tradition** (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1955), pp. 1–8. Bailey rejects the sexual interpretation of the

Hebrew **jada** ("to know") (pp. 2–5). In his analysis, he also refers to G. A. Barton, "Sodomy," **Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics**, ed. James Hastings (Edinburgh: T&T Clark; New York: Scribner's, 1920), vol. 11, p. 672a, who writes: "It [**jada**] may mean no more than 'to get acquainted with,' and the wickedness which Lot is said to have anticipated that the men of Sodom contemplated may have been no more than to give the strangers a beating." However, Bailey rejects the idea that Lot was already expecting a beating for his guests. Instead, he interprets the events as a violation by Lot of the customs of hospitality in Sodom, which could endanger the city: "Is it not possible that Lot, either in ignorance or in defiance of the laws of Sodom, had exceeded the rights of a **ger** in that city by receiving and entertaining two 'foreigners' whose intentions might be hostile, and whose credentials, it seems had not been examined?" (p. 4).

4. John Boswell, **Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality: Gay People in Western Europe from the Beginning of the Christian Era to the Fourteenth Century** (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1980), pp. 93–96.

5 Compare J. Bergman and G. J. Botterweck, "jada", *Theologisches Wörterbuch zum Alten Testament* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1982), 3:494.

6 See Bergman and Botterweck, *ThWAT*, 3:485–490 *passim*.

7 Brinkschröder refers to the clearly sexual meaning of *jada'* in Genesis 19:8 as the "Achillesferse von Baileys Argumentation" See Michael Brinkschröder, *Sodom als Symptom: Gleichgeschlechtliche Sexualität im christlichen Imaginären - eine religionsgeschichtliche Anamnese, Religionsgeschichtliche Versuche und Vorarbeiten* 55 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2006), p. 186.

8 If hospitality does not take precedence over the well-being and safety of one's female family members, Lot's dubious offer can also be seen as indicating that a homosexual act was worse for him than a heterosexual one.

9 For Lot's reaction, see Kenneth A. Mathews, **Genesis 11:27-50:26**, *The New American Commentary 1B* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2005), p. 236.

10 Also see the assessment by Robert Ignatius Letellier, *Day in Mamre, Night in Sodom: Abraham and Lot in Genesis 18 and 19, Biblical Interpretation Series 10* (Leiden: Brill, 1995), p. 147.

11 Michael Brinkschröder, *Sodom als Symptom*, pp. 183–187: "This interpretation [by Bailey], which primarily relies on the argument that the Hebrew word for 'to know' should not be understood in a sexual sense, is in my opinion unsustainable" (p. 183). "Both motives are intertwined in the narrative, as the hospitality is violated precisely by the intended same-sex rape by the men of Sodom, and same-sex sexuality is portrayed as sexualized violence of men against men or angels" (pp. 186–187, *his emphasis*).

12 Walter Bauer, *Griechisch-Deutsches Wörterbuch zu den Schriften des Neuen Testaments und der frühchristlichen Literatur* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1988), p. 493.

13 Horst Balz, "έκπορνεύω," Exegetisches Wörterbuch zum Neuen Testament (Stuttgart: Verlag W. Kohlhammer, 2011), p. 1024.

14 The story of Sodom has had a significant impact in biblical texts: Deut 29:22; 32:32; Ps 11:6; Isa 1:9-10; 3:9; 13:19; Jer 23:14; 49:18; 50:40; Lam 4:6; Ezek 16:46-56; Amos 4:11; Zeph 2:9; Matt 10:15; 11:23-24; Luke 10:12; 17:28-32; Rom 9:29; 1 Tim 1:10; 2 Pet 2:6; Jude 7; Rev 11:8.

15. The classification of Sodom's sin(s) ranges from sexual sins (e.g., lust [Philo, Abraham 134-45], fornication [Jub. 16:5-6], sex with prostitutes [T. Levi 14:6], unnatural sex [T. Naph. 3:4], sex between men [Augustine, Civ. 16:30], and debauchery [2 Pet 2:7]) to non-sexual sins (e.g., arrogance [Sirach 16:8], xenophobia [Josephus, Ant. 1.194-95], greed [b. Sanh. 109a; m. Ab. 5:10], failure [Mt 10:14-15] or refusal of hospitality [Wisdom 19:14]).

16. Ezekiel 16:43, 47, 50, 51, 58 and Leviticus 18:22, 26, 27, 29, 30; 20:13.

17. Ezekiel 16:43, 58 and Leviticus 18:17; 20:14.

18. It is remarkable that 2 Peter 2:7 refers to Lot as "righteous" and even mentions him alongside Noah. Why is Lot called righteous? Presumably, it is primarily due to his hospitality, less so because of his "offer" of the two daughters. That Lot can be counted among the righteous seems to have been recognized by Abraham as well. He pleads for Sodom to be spared so that the righteous do not perish with the wicked (Gen 18:23-32). Lot was evidently counted among the righteous in his eyes. Nevertheless, the story in Gen 19 casts a shadow over Lot's morality.
